

## The validity of the genus *Veles* Bangs, 1918 (Caprimulgidae)

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The Brown Nightjar *Caprimulgus binotatus* is a poorly known species endemic to the rainforests of western and central Africa (Fry *et al.* 1988, Cleere 1998, 1999). It has rarely been seen well by field ornithologists and there are few specimens in museum collections. Distinctive morphological and behavioural features suggest that its placement in the genus *Caprimulgus* requires reappraisal.

### Material

I examined 13 specimens (8 males, 4 females, 1 unsexed) in the following museums: The Natural History Museum, Tring, U.K. (6); National Natuurhistorisch Museum, Leiden, Netherlands (1); Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris, France (1); Koninklijk Museum voor Midden-Afrika, Tervuren, Belgium (3); Carnegie Museum of Natural History, Pittsburg, U.S.A. (2).

### Discussion

Described by Bonaparte (1850), a specimen at The Natural History Museum, Tring, was identified as 'a very singular species with no near ally' (Hartert 1892) and one at the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard, was recognised as being different from *Caprimulgus* by Bangs (1918), who erected a new genus, *Veles*. Subsequent recognition of *Veles* varied, usually without further comment, and the last author to treat it as valid appears to have been Peters (1940).

Morphological features that differentiate *binotatus* from *Caprimulgus* are: the small, weak rictal bristles; the slightly protruding 'ridged' crown feathers above the eye; the stiff, pale feathers on either side and to the rear of the crown which form very small 'ear-tufts'; the wing tip reaching nearly to the end of the short tail; the curved, outer primaries; the stiff 'boat-shaped', vaulted or tented structure of the tail; the strong feet, and the short, fluffy under-tail coverts (Bangs 1918, Chapin 1939, Carroll & Fry 1987, Fry 1988, Fry *et al.* 1988, Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 1998, Cleere 1998, 1999).

*Caprimulgus* nightjars lack dense crown feathers that protrude above the eye, lack 'ear-tufts', have elongated rictal bristles, and possess straight outer primaries. Curved primaries are usually found in species that use their wings to produce mechanical sounds, other than wing-clapping, during courtship display flights, e.g. *Eleothreptus*. This type of display has so far not been recorded for the Brown Nightjar. The stiff 'tented' tail feathers of the Brown Nightjar are not present in other afrotopical nightjars, and their strong feet may be an adaptation for roosting and perching above

ground. Most nightjars are more terrestrial in their roosting and nesting habits, and therefore have somewhat weaker feet.

Two other critical differences between the Brown Nightjar and *Caprimulgus* species are that it probably nests on branches of trees (Carroll & Fry 1987), and it has a strange voice. Other nightjars lay their eggs on the ground, on leaf litter, bare soil, rocks or flat roofs. The strange metallic song is reminiscent of an *Epomops* bat (Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 1998), and is quite unlike the churring or whistling songs of the afrotropical *Caprimulgus* species.

Recognition of the genus *Veles* for the Brown Nightjar appears to be warranted on morphological, vocal and behavioural differences, although its relationship to other nightjars remains unclear. Until its true affinities can be determined by molecular studies, I propose the systematic placement of *Veles* between *Eurostopus* and *Nyctidromus*.

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